



A network of eight wooden blocks is arranged in a circular pattern, connected by thin white lines. Each block features a black speech bubble icon with a white symbol inside. The symbols include a bar chart with an upward arrow, a medical cross, a gear, a heart, a person, a gear, a medical cross, and a speech bubble. The background is a solid orange color.

KEEP TALKING



Pope Francis gives us a model for continuing the synod process. Let's follow it.

By Robert W. McElroy

Can synodality become a deeper element of Catholic life in the United States? Our current process may prove this to be so. One of the central sentiments expressed in our diocesan synodal consultations has been that the people of God have at times not been meaningfully heard and responded to in the institutional life of the church, and they fear that the synodal process might be another in a series of moments when hopes are raised only to be frustrated. But the current synod process offers a glimpse of a church yet to come. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics have engaged with the church on their joys, their sorrows and their hopes for what the church can be today and tomorrow.

Across the United States, dioceses, parishes and religious communities have undertaken intensive processes of consultation and dialogue in order to help prepare for the global synod on synodality that will take place in Rome in October 2023. Soon, each local church will forward to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops a formal report on their consultation, which will contribute to the work of the global church.

The breadth of consultation within dioceses across our nation provides real hope that synodality will become a deeper element of Catholic life in the United States. But there is a structural dilemma embedded in the consultation process that threatens to undermine the path-

way to deeper synodality. Ironically, the very success that ecclesial communities in our country have had in beginning the process of synodal consultation magnifies this dilemma.

The process of consultation that we have initiated has given participants a glimpse of what sustained synodality might mean. Some dioceses have already fashioned a process to continue the building of synodality in the coming months. But once the reports to Washington have been sent, there will be a strong and natural institutional tendency in most dioceses to let the process of synodality at local levels go dormant until after the pope's apostolic exhortation on the universal synod is released in 2024. Understandably, many will want to wait until the deliberations of the universal church are completed before taking action.

Embracing such a pathway will frustrate our people and stunt movement toward transformation. A two-year period of suspense in the development of synodality in our local churches, particularly regarding the parish- and diocesan-level questions that the consultation process has already yielded, will deeply reinforce these fears.

Fortunately, the theology and practice of synodality that have already emerged from the Second Vatican Council and the writings and actions of Pope Francis provide an architecture for us



Cardinal Mario Grech, center, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, and other Vatican officials lead an online listening session with 30 people who have disabilities on May 19.

Every Christian community must ask itself how it can sustain and support its members in their efforts to bring the Gospel into the world.

to continue substantive synodal formation during the next two years. This architecture consists of three elements: the see-judge-act methodology that lies at the heart of the synodal process, the characteristics of a synodal church that Pope Francis has articulated, and the overwhelming imperative for constant and effective evangelization that has been a hallmark of the pontificates of St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.

See-Judge-Act

In the years following the First World War, Joseph Cardijn became a worker priest in Brussels, seeking to organize working men and women in pursuit of justice. While doing so, he came to understand that true work on behalf of justice and solidarity required a process of genuinely coming to know the real world situations that workers confronted, of judging these realities in the light of the Gospel and then of choosing to act concretely to transform the world they faced. “See-judge-act,” the dynamic of engagement that Cardijn brought to the world, became an electrifying construct for confronting injustice—revealing its contradictions to Catholic faith and generating bold and sustained action.

St. John XXIII brought this penetrating insight and framework to the world in his encyclical “*Mater et Magistra*.” The church of Latin America adopted this framework as a primary method of engaging with the realities of human life and the renewal of the church. And the *encuentro* process that deeply enriched the church in the United States during the last decade placed “see-judge-act” at its very center. An understanding of the three steps of this basic framework in the context of our current synodal moment

in the United States is helpful in appreciating its potential for advancing synodal formation during the next two years.

1. See clearly. One of the most striking elements of “*Laudato Si*” was its clear and bold analysis of the empirical realities that threaten the earth, which is our common home. Seeing the situation clearly is the foundation for the whole of the encyclical. In pursuing the synodal renewal of our church, we must engage comprehensively in just such a process of analysis, observation, listening and illumination. We must be attentive to “the signs of the times,” those conditions that structure our world and the possibilities for renewal. Prominent among these are the church’s sinful legacy of sexual abuse as well as secularism, the denial of religious freedom, the destruction of the earth, racism, abortion, and social and economic inequalities. We should seek to delineate the world and our church as they truly are, without pretense or obfuscation, paying particular attention to the transcendent elements of human existence.

Central to the church’s capacity to see clearly is the humanization of truth. Pope Francis underscored this in his words to participants at the second world meeting of popular movements in Bolivia in 2015:

When we look into the eyes of the suffering, when we see the faces of the endangered *campesino*, the poor laborer, the downtrodden native, the homeless family, the persecuted migrant, the unemployed young person, the exploited child... We have seen and heard not a cold statistic but the pain of a suffering humanity, our own pain, our own flesh. This is something quite different from abstract theorizing or eloquent indignation.

The synodal process that we have begun has invited a search for such a humanized and transcendent truth. We have initiated an effort to consult with women and men to see the challenges and the joys of faith, hope and justice through their eyes, to truly see without limits or boundaries, and so to renew our church and our world. It is important to sustain and enlarge this process of listening, observation and illumination by deepening our quest to discover the ecclesial and societal reality that can provide a foundation for genuine renewal.

2. Judge by the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The process of seeing humanized truth within the transcendent life of the



church leads us inextricably toward a second stage: judging by the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ how we are called to transform those realities. This is a process of profound discernment and dialogue that seeks to uncover the challenge that our faith brings to renewing the church and world. It is not the work of individuals but of communities—local, regional and universal. And it has begun.

During the next two years, the church in the United States can deepen this process of judgment by focusing on important and addressable pastoral issues that have emerged in the initial consultation process. A practice of discernment and implementation centered upon such issues will embed a synodal culture more deeply in our faith communities and speak to the reality that synodality cannot be a sporadic process.

One of the questions that has arisen during the synodal consultations that have taken place is: What are the limits to the topics and conclusions that the synodal process can legitimately engage with during this process of judgment?

It is essential for us all to understand that Catholic doctrine and discipline reflect a deep and abiding heritage and claim in the life of the church. Moreover, many major questions that have arisen in our synodal consultations in

the United States touch upon issues that must be addressed in union with the global church and the See of Peter. This is especially true since regional differences of culture, history and perspective create differences within the church that must be reconciled in a common faith.

Yet our synodal process should not automatically reject certain topics or positions for dialogue and deliberation merely because they are questions of long-held discipline in the life of the church or reformable Catholic doctrine. The last three synodal processes testify to this reality. The synod on marriage and family life examined Catholic teachings and practice regarding divorce and remarriage. The synodal process for young adults pointed repeatedly to the alienation that the church's stances on L.G.B.T. issues and the role of women generate among young people. And the Amazon synod saw in the church of the Amazon's devotion to the sacramental life of the church a call to allow greater ordination of married men and the ordination of women as deacons.

The willingness of the church in the United States to listen deeply to our people in their views on these and other questions that are being raised in the synodal dialogues points to vital ecclesial questions: Do we genuinely regard

Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez of Philadelphia joins college students, other young adults and ministry leaders during a synodal listening session at La Salle University on April 4.

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CNS photo/Sarah Webb, CatholicPhilly.com

the community of the faithful as a font of Catholic teaching? Do we see the lived reality of Catholic laymen and laywomen as a prism that can help to reinvigorate Catholic doctrine and discipline so that they can contribute more fully to the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The deposit of faith is not an inert and abstract body of teaching that forms a straitjacket for Christian faith and practice. It is the invitation to experience an encounter with the paschal mystery that formed our church at its birth and continues to form it today in authentic continuity. If we genuinely listen to the voices of our people with openness in these days, we can reinforce that invitation even as we forge greater unity in the church.

3. Act on behalf of justice. Having seen bluntly and penetratingly the realities that confront us in the church and the world, and having discerned where the call of the Gospel is leading us to transformation, synodality demands sustained and unrelenting action to achieve the change that discernment has made clear for us. Transformative action needs to be visionary, strategic, realistic and rooted in the varying levels of life in the church and in society. In addition, a process of enduring synodality in the life of the church must be sustainable so that it becomes deeply rooted in the hearts and souls of the people of God and in the evangelizing outreach of the church to the world.

This is the reason that Pope Francis has constantly stressed the long-term nature and goals of this synodal process. It is not rooted in specific outcomes, no matter

how important. It seeks nothing less than a recasting of the culture of the church that will endure for generations. For this reason, the Holy Father has insisted, the synodal reflection and action that we are undertaking throughout the world must be thought of as a process of conversion. Such a conversion is the prerequisite for sustained and Gospel-oriented action in this historic moment.

It is this ongoing process of conversion that will be undermined if, after having undertaken the first steps of synodality, we effectively accept a two-year hiatus from synodal renewal. We have initiated the process of seeing the humanized and transcendent truth that characterizes the reality of our church and our world. We have asked our people in the synodal consultations to offer their judgment in the light of faith about how we should move toward reform and renewal. We have brought to people a glimpse of what synodal dialogue can mean.

This glimpse can become a much deeper reality during the coming two years if we undertake to apply the process of “see-judge-act” in order to build upon the foundation that has been laid.

The Marks of a Synodal Church

If the “see-judge-act” framework provides a process for our moving forward in the next two years, the central elements that Pope Francis has articulated as marks of synodality provide the guideposts for our journey. These seven elements should be at the forefront of our deliberations:

Bishop Robert W. McElroy of San Diego chats with participants in the closing session of the San Diego Diocese's synod on young adults at Mission San Diego de Alcalá on Nov. 9, 2019.



1. Synodality points to the reality that the whole of the people of God are journeying together in the life of the church and in synodal action. This means that we cannot operate from a mindset of complacency or one that accentuates the differences among the baptized.

2. Synodality demands a constant stance of discernment, of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the life of the community. It is all too easy for us in ecclesial life, at all levels, to become focused on the perspectives that we bring to dialogue and decision making instead of first pausing our own perspectives, interests and alignments and listening to the small whispering sound that Elijah recognized as the voice of God calling to him.

3. Synodality is continually rooted in listening to the word of God and joyfully celebrating the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the Christian life. These elements are both constitutive realities that form the church and provide vital nourishment for the community as a whole.

4. Synodality demands a profound stance of authentic listening from every believer who seeks to participate in and contribute to the life of the church. Listening is the respect we owe to others in recognition of their equal dignity. Listening flows from a recognition that we have so much to learn. Listening lies at the heart of true encounter with the other disciples we meet in the life of the church. Correspondingly, synodality demands that Catholics speak out honestly and forthrightly in our ecclesial lives, so that the voices of the people of God can be authentically heard.

5. A synodal church is a humble and honest church. It acknowledges and seeks to atone for the wounds it has brought to others, particularly the sexual abuse of young people by priests. A synodal church genuinely seeks to discern its woundedness and embraces reform. Its holiness is exemplified by its humility, not by denial or the protection of its reputation.

6. A synodal church is a discerning church, not a parliamentary one. It must empower the voices of all, but its search for God's will cannot be reduced to building majorities or forming coalitions. It is essential to recognize that synodality is more concerned with nurturing a culture within the life of the church rather than specific policy outcomes. It recognizes the important hierarchical dimensions of our ecclesial life and tradition and also finds its foundation in the equal dignity of all of the baptized.

7. Finally, synodality demands a participative, inclusive and co-responsible church. If missionary discipleship is to become a reality, it must be rooted in an ecclesiology and pastoral culture that genuinely promotes these concepts in practice. Church structures that stifle full-bodied participation by Catholics in every facet of the life of the parish, diocese or universal church must be re-examined and reformed. Practices that effectively exclude individuals or groups from feeling welcome in the church must be rejected.

An Outward-Looking Church

If the marks of synodality that Pope Francis has outlined



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provide a clear road map for synodal formation during the next two years, the imperative of evangelization provides a commanding reason for moving forward. The whole of synodality is oriented toward evangelization.

As the preparatory document chartering the synodal process states:

The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centred on ourselves. Our mission is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This Synodal Process has a deeply missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world.

The notion of missionary discipleship constitutes the heart of synodality. Every disciple must ask how she can bring the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to her family life, her life in the workplace and participation in society. And every Christian community must ask itself how it can sustain and support its members in their efforts to bring the Gospel into the world.

The most penetrating and sustained sadness that men and women in countless synodal dialogues have pointed to is the reality that young people have drifted away from the church in a seemingly unstoppable way. And the greatest hope that emerges from these same dialogues is that the church will find a way to bring our young people home. This is a profound imperative of evangelization that cannot wait two more years to be addressed.

Synodal formation provides a pathway for renewing the internal life of the church and going to the peripheries of our world to proclaim the Gospel. We must effectively bring the message of salvation that comes in the person of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard the Gospel, and, just as important, to those who have heard the message but have not found it engaging.

Synodality is a process of conversion that requires nurturing and constancy. We have invited our people to this deep life of renewal. They have responded by sharing their deepest loves and hardships in the life of the church, and they have pointed to specific areas for change in parochial and diocesan life. By deeply continuing synodal formation during the next two years, we can build synodality, reform important elements of our ecclesial life and be stronger witnesses to a participatory vision of the church. We can also embody the “healthy decentralization” that synodality envisions. By adopting such a pathway, we will sustain the synodal impulse in our nation so that the fruits of the universal synod will enrich and build upon an already growing reality of synodal life.

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